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ABSTRACT

To learn correct grammar, developmental students must practice writing correctly. However, the traditional exercises offered in handbooks, workbooks, and textbooks not only fail to provide habituation in correctness, they actually provide practice in "wrongness." Instead of isolating individual problems, they promote confusion by linking them. Alternative exercises should be designed with the following principles in mind: each exercise teaches only one specific skill, is nonerror based, and is ideally a short, organized essay. Using these principles, exercises can be constructed for the writing lab or basic/introductory classroom as a sequence. The first exercise familiarizes students with correct versions of the grammatical situation they are attempting to master. The second exercise, which enables students to practice the required skills through rewriting, has students select the word or words they think need to be rewritten. After the selections are checked by an instructor, students make the changes they feel are necessary, always rewriting the entire selection. Finally, students are given a mastery test. Rather than use the familiar multiple choice, fill in, or error based exercises, students write controlled and guided compositions, specifically designed to elicit the particular grammatical situation the exercises have been attempting to teach. (HOD)

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Thomas Friedmann

IDENTIFICATION, REWRITING, MASTERY: Alternative Exercises for Basic and Introductory Students

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Although at OCC we designate mistakes on the exit exam as "flagrant errors," there is nothing exotic about the grammar we wish students in our developmental composition course to master. For most writers, avoiding errors in the simple past, in subject-verb agreement, in sentence boundaries, in plurals, and in spelling is a matter of habit, of automatic vigilance. The sense of correctness for such basic grammar skills resides below the level of awareness. We know with our muscles as much as with our minds where the letter a is on the typewriter keyboard, which side of the face we first reach to shave, what the hands and feet must do to engage the clutch and shift the standard transmission. We do not have to think about these movements once they have become automatic. And they have become automatic through habituation, through great repetition. We have similarly programmed our automatic pilot in basic grammar. When in the midst of writing we pause because the configuration of letters suddenly "doesn't look right," we are involuntarily and automatically comparing the word we have just written to an image in the brain that has been engraved there through repeated acquaintance with the correct appearance of that word. By contrast, the average basic/developmental (and all too often, introductory) student suffers from a lack of habituation. He lacks the visual image of the correct word and he lacks the physical feel of the correct sequences. His fingers have not developed the sensation, nor his eyes the configuration of correctness. If anything, their repeated errors have familarized basic students to "wrongness" to such an extent that when shown the correct form, they often complain that "it doesn't look right."

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If developmental students are to learn correct grammar, they must do it by doing, not by hearing teachers talk about doing. The finest explanation of how to knock a nail into the wall will do little to teach the novice picture hanger how to use the hammer and the nail. Instead he must heft hammer and aim at nail, until, eventually, his impact is true. We can do no less than require that the exercises students work on will similarly produce, through repetition, habituation in correctness. But the traditional exercises offered in handbooks, workbooks, and textbooks--sentence completion/fill-ins, choice between correct and incorrect versions, and proofreading exercises--not only do not provide habituation in correctness, they actually provide practice in "wrongness."

Traditional exercises have the following shortcomings:

1. they offer error-based instruction
2. they offer more than one item for practice at the same time
3. they offer confusing words in tandem, perpetuating confusion
   a) in punctuation (position of quotation marks, use of apostrophes)
   b) in content words (lie/lay, accept/except, affect/effect)
   c) in grammatical terms (their/there, it's/its)
4. they offer no context

Error-based instruction teaches errors. Spelling exercises that contain misspelled words, sentence boundary exercises that consist of unlabeled fragments and run-ons, proofreading exercises choked with errors in tense consistency, in subject-verb agreement, and pronoun reference do not teach correctness, at least not in a basic English course. Students in these classes, because of their infrequent exposure to correct writing, cannot distinguish easily between correct and incorrect versions. Teaching by contrast works when the "good" is firmly fixed. For these students there is no fixed image of correctness.

Exercises that do not distinguish between correct and incorrect versions essentially test students, not teach. And in the process of testing, they confuse. Lacking a firm vision of a word's spelling, students are exposed to no less than four wrong versions.[1] Lacking a clear sense of sentence completeness, they see printed paragraphs in which complete sentences are indistinguishable from fragments and run-ons.[2] Students remember what they see. The camouflaged errors register as strongly as does the groundcover of correct sentences and words. Instructors are themselves not immune to the power of exposure. Those who have taught basic classes are often startled to find in their own writing one of those typical errors they have seen so often in student papers. And most teachers know that students remember incorrect answers as well as correct answers. They recall what they hear and see, without remembering if the recalled version is correct or not. Exercises that contain errors will thus often teach students to remember errors as correct writing.

Compounding student confusion are exercises that are not merely error-based, but multiple error-based. Not content with asking students to proofread for one error--tense, for example--the exercise will contain errors in other areas: punctuation, s-v agreement, or pronoun reference.[3] Even when the exercise wisely limits itself to one error--fragments, for example--it offers a variety of fragments. Thus, a student who tends to make only ing fragments is unnecessarily exposed to added detail, subordinating, and other types of fragments.[4] The response--the exercise attempts to duplicate actual student essays which are likely to contain a variety of errors--does not justify the use of multiple errors in an exercise. Basic students faced with multiple errors do not learn to eliminate any, since the exercises never isolate single errors.

Teaching(and having students practicing) confusing words in tandem, is a variation of the error-based exercise. By some mysterious logic, words that are meant to be kept apart are deliberately associated in students' minds. Contradictory punctuation--the apostrophe, for example, which indicates possession in one instance but plural in another--is invariably taught and practiced within the same few sentences.[5] Grammatical terms that baffle students because they are "sound-alikes" are continually listed and linked.[6] That confusing words, terms, and punctuations are listed together may seem forgivable in handbooks, but not when those same handbooks are advertised and used not merely as reference, but as teaching tools. And, of course, any book that offers exercises--practice--in confusing items and does so by constantly linking those items, is harming students. The task of exercises, after all, is to ingrain correct usage to such an extent that students will use the right form automatically. Laid out side by side, confusing terms become difficult to separate. If learned in this manner, they become distinguishable only when both partners are present. When students are focusing on content and proofreading only incidentally, how many will notice an error in usage if the terms are not offered neatly, within parentheses, for their choice?[7]

The final shortcoming of traditional exercises is their absolute lack of context. When all students have to do is write a single word, darken a space, circle the correct choice, or, as most recently, press the right letter on a keyboard, they are not being provided with any context for the use of the particular term. Where is the exercise--practice in conditioning--when in attempting to learn the use of a/an, students are asked to scan a list of words and then, numbering their pages from 1-20, asked to write either a or an? Imagine not even requiring students to write down the word that determines the choice! Nor is there any context when students are asked to select between two verbs

in order to match the subject. Without the context of the sentence (or, at the least, the subject), the choice students make is irrelevant. Either word is "correct." Either a or an is correct. It is appropriateness in a particular situation that is being questioned, and without the situation, there is no question. What do students learn then, if all they do is write a or an? What habituation in correctness is taking place? Think of a student who misspells aspirin by leaving out the first i. Noticing her error, she carefully inserts the letter. Has she practiced the correct spelling of aspirin? Not at all. The movement of her fingers and the watchfulness of her eye remains habituated to following the p with the r, not with the i. She has labored mightily but foolishly. In another context, if she is less conscientious, aspirin without the i will still feel right and look right. Not having practiced the context of aspirin, she has mastered only the formation of the letter i. In the case of grammatical issues such as pronoun reference, tense consistency, or number, which matter throughout a paragraph or an essay, working with individual, unrelated, and few sentences seems pointless. Individual sentences illustrate the workings of grammar more easily; related sentences, perhaps short essays, offer better practice.

In sum, traditional exercises are haphazardly designed and do not offer students the opportunity to practice grammatical skills. Intending to teach correctness, they display wrongness. Intending to teach writing, they require more watching. Instead of isolating individual problems, they promote confusion by linking them. What then, are the alternatives? What is the prescription for exercises that would offer developmental and other students repeated acquaintance and practice with correct forms?

Before offering the specifics of the blueprint, the implications of the term "exercise" bear repeating. If a lesson that one practices is to train or condition successfully, it must be carefully designed and persistently applied. Haphazard

movements do not warm up a jogger's muscles; a single movement, no matter how well designed, is equally useless. In designing these alternative assignments, one must keep foremost the requirement that these exercises should compel students to work mightily, rather than require teachers or tutors to explain extensively. What students learn will depend on what they do, not on what teachers say.

These alternative exercises should be designed with the following principles in mind:

1. Each exercise will attempt to teach only one specific skill.

The diagnosis of a student's errors must be very precise. Rather than accepting the broad designation "errors in subject-verb agreement," for example, the tutor or instructor must determine the specific error within that general category, and then design an exercise for that particular weakness. A student might have difficulties in s-v agreement only when prepositional phrases intervene, only when there are conjunctions, or only when sentences begin with there is/there are. There should be a different exercise available for each of these situations. A catch-all s-v agreement exercise containing a variety of errors in this category is unacceptable.

2. Exercises should be non-error based.

Teaching by contrast--offering incorrect examples in exercises--works against the stated objective of habituating students in correctness. Offering only correct writing seeks to ingrave the correct image and to help coordinate hands and eyes to the configurations of correctly spelled words and correctly punctuated sentences.

3. Exercises would ideally be short, organized essays, although long paragraphs would also be satisfactory.

Students are never required to write ten unrelated sentences, one beneath the other. Nor are they ever required to fill-in a word or circle one. An exercise should enable students to practice the kinds of writing they are generally required to do, rather than offer them artificial situations. Pronoun agreement has to operate throughout a paragraph, as do verbs, point of view, and person. The paragraph or short essay provides the necessary context for the learning of the particular skill.

Keeping these principles in mind, we construct the actual exercises for the writing lab or basic/introductory classroom as a sequence rather than as a single exercise.

1. The first exercise in the sequence is an exercise for recognition or identification.

The objective is to familiarize students with correct versions of the grammatical situation they are attempting to master. Traditional exercises think to teach by having students identify and correct errors. Our alternative attempts to sensitize students to the correct form. A sequence for teaching the s marker would begin with a paragraph (perhaps in a foreign language, á lá Gould), in which students are asked to underline every s in the final position. To begin a sequence in the teaching of the apostrophe, we present a paragraph containing apostrophes (of one type only!), and ask the student to circle them (or write them) and to circle and write the words "possessed." To teach there is/ there are, we offer a short essay filled with those phrases and ask

students to select and write the word in each instance that determines the use of is/are. Again, everything in this essay is correct, and students are reassured that there are no "booby-trapped" sentences. They are expected to notice relationships and familiarize their hands and eyes with correct situations. The instructions to the student in this first step may be split into two parts. First, he could be asked to select the correct term by merely underlining or circling. The instructor and student could check the selections. If they are correct, they would be then written out. This last is essential. Unless hands and eyes work together, they labor in vain. Merely looking at right answers, even circling them, will not habituate the writer's "automatic pilot" into correctness.

2. The second exercise in the sequence enables students to practice the required skills through rewriting.

"Rewriting" is a convenient term to describe exercises that contain no errors. Where traditional exercises attempt to teach s-v agreement, tense consistency, pronoun reference, and other desired aspects of grammar by offering passages which contain incorrect examples of these items and asking students to make necessary corrections, "rewriting" offers passages in one form and asks students to rewrite them into another form. A short essay in the present tense for example, is rewritten into the past. An essay in which the subject is singular is rewritten in the plural. An essay about a man is rewritten about a woman. In each case, students rewrite the entire selection, altering or making changes only in the required areas and copying the rest. The virtue of this approach is that it never presents students with errors. Since the problem of most basic students is

that they lack a firm sense of correctness, this method avoids adding to the confusion. Instead of exposing students to errors, it provides them with many instances of correctness, asking them subsequently to rewrite, rather than correct errors.

As one constructs these rewriting exercises, one must keep in mind the principles enumerated earlier. If devising a passage in the present to be rewritten by students into the past, the instructor would be wise to select only regular or only irregular verbs. Some students have no difficulty writing irregular verbs in the past but consistently drop -ed endings. An accurately designed exercise teaches one or the other, not both at once. Similarly, in teaching pronoun reference, one would not wish to complicate the change from singular pronouns to plurals by also asking students to concern themselves with subject-verb agreement. A selection entirely in the past (and without verbs of being!) will enable students to concentrate exclusively on the changes in the pronouns as the subject changes from the singular to the plural.

As with Identification, the first step in the sequence, students embarked on Rewriting can be asked to select the word or words they think need to be rewritten. After the tutor or instructor checks the selections, students can go ahead and make the changes they feel are necessary, always rewriting the entire selection, rather than the individual words being changed.

Part of the design for these small essays would include correct examples of the skills the students are trying to master. A passage mostly in the singular may contain, for example, a sentence correctly in the plural, so that

students working to rewrite the entire essay into the plural might have that sentence as a guidepost. Other considerations might include making the contents relevant to the skill, e.g. an eyewitness account of the Wright Brothers' flight, written in the present tense, would justifiably rewritten today in the past tense. Finally, the paragraph or short essay would be carefully constructed to follow accepted organizational schemes or rhetorical modes, so that in the process of rewriting the grammar, students would also be unconsciously practicing correctness in the areas of style or organization. The theory behind this entire scheme is, of course, a familiar one. Instructors are often conscientious about assigning prose pieces by masters of style, assuming that exposure to "good style" or "good writing" will prove beneficial. Rewriting exercises avoid the negative of that axiom. By refusing to expose basic students to bad grammar, they seek to prevent incorrect forms from becoming familiar and comfortable to students. And in designing these exercises with accepted principles of organization and style in mind, the original theory is adhered to, faithfully. Naturally, the burden is on the designer of the exercise. Given these various principles to keep in mind, one cannot simply take a passage by some well-known writer and by paying for permission, assume to have fulfilled all his obligations. The effective exercise must clearly be carefully crafted.

3. After a number of exercises in Identification and Rewriting, students can be offered a mastery test.

True mastery can be demonstrated, of course, only in the students' general writing. However, mastery tests can be administered at this point in ways which help strengthen the skills Identification and Rewriting have sought to teach. Three possibilities exist. The obvious is to let students write write their essays in other courses and examine those papers for mastery of the desired skills. One problem with calling such a determination a "mastery test" is that students can easily avoid confronting their weaknesses by avoiding the situation.

writing very short sentences, for example, to avoid run-ons, or using of the to avoid the possessive. To test truly, one must require students to face the grammatical situation. One method, then, would be to use the familiar multiple choice, fill-in, or even error-based exercises (provided they are limited to one type of error). Those traditional exercises, as I have argued earlier,[8] test rather than teach anyway. A preferable alternative would be to test for mastery by asking students to write controlled or guided compositions, specifically designed to elicit the particular grammatical situation the exercises have been attempting to teach. By this I do not mean the sort of requests one can find in self-designated "controlled texts" that seem only vaguely acquainted with the principles of guided composition. Instead of asking students to "Write three sentences in which the singular possessive appears," a true mastery test devises a situation in which the use of the apostrophe is unavoidable, saying, for example, "Describe a family meal. Instead of naming the members of your family, identify them by their relationship to your mother. For example, write my mother's husband, not my father." In testing for mastery of tense consistency or subject-verb agreement, I ask students to compare a car they once had to one they drive now. Whatever else an instructor hopes to find in such an essay, he or she will undoubtedly discover if students have mastered the use of the past, the present, and of subject-verb agreement.

By the time a student has worked his way through the type of sequence--Identification, Rewriting, Mastery--described here, one may safely assume that he has exercised mightily. One cannot say the same thing about the haphazardly constituted exercises in the traditional text or workbook. In addition, by requiring students to rewrite from one correct orm to another, these exercises do not expose them to "horrible examples," and thus avoid familiarizing them with "wrongness." The issue of how to go about teaching students

to eliminate errors--fragments, run-ons, misspellings, incorrect capitalization--without letting them see those errors, is a challenging one, but one I hope to address in another "blueprint."

The strictures enumerated here for alternative exercises may make it appear that their construction would be quite difficult, demanding attention to a variety of details and taxing severely the time and ingenuity of tutors and instructors. Such a perception would be quite accurate. Care, love, enterprise, and ingenuity on the part of instructors have always been available, however. Unfortunately for the basic students at all levels of education, those talents have been lavished on how instructors were presenting, explaining, or illustrating their material. Surely those admirable skills can be rechanneled to serve in the creation of exercises that students have to do. Our most exquisite explanation does not do a tenth of the good that a well-constructed exercise does, as it engages a student's hands, eyes, and mind in practicing a skill.

Finally, behind these constructions discussed here stands the spectre of "control." Advocates of exercises are accused of rigidity, of straight-jacketing, of stifling, of limiting the student writer. I would say simply this: In the sciences a successfully controlled experiment merits the highest accolades. If variables can be controlled, the experiment can be repeated and its success independently measured. It is only in this sense--of controlling variables, of isolating steps in a sequence--that I urge the use of these "controlled" exercises and compositions. At the same time, please remember that "control" is never absent in the composition class. Instructors control topics, rhetorical modes, length, organizational schemes, essays for discussion, tone, level of discourse, even, as at UCLA and (experimentally) at Bard College, the contents and strategy for the entire course. I ask only for control of the practice

sessions, not of the on-field execution. Certainly control, employed in the structuring of exercises, seems legitimate. If I were a football coach, I would be damned insistent on prescribed practice sessions but trust the quarterback to make his own decisions come the ballgame. And thus this discussion of exercises, a presentation one may compare to the actions of a football coach at a Monday morning conference who prefers to expound on how he had designed the plays in scrimmage, rather than explain his team's performance in the game.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See for example John Cooper, ACE 502 Skills Book (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1977), p. 19.

[2]Sandra Schor and Judith Fishman, in Guide to Writing, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1981), offer a passage of this type, although they do somewhat prepare students by earlier exercises that specify either fragments or run-ons. (p. 229). They do not, however, identify the fragments or the run-ons in earlier exercises.

[3]William Herman and Jeffrey M. Young, Troubleshooting: Basic Writing Skills (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), pp. 144-45, asks students to correct, in the same paragraph, errors in person, tense, and number.

[4]Jim W. Corder, Handbook of Current English, 5th ed. (Glenview, Ill.:Scott, Foresman and Co., 1978), pp. 44-5. Although designated a handbook (and in fact, offering very clear explanations of fragments), this text moves from being a reference work to being a teaching text once it introduces exercises. One text that does label fragments and even isolates types is John Langan's English Skills (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1977), pp. 272-286.

[5]The John C. Hodges and Mary S. Whitten Harbrace College Handbook, 8th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 133-37, runs through all variations in the use of the apostrophe and offers an exercise which requires the insertion of apostrophes in possessives, contractions and plurals. This is actually an improvement over previous editions in which students were also asked to eliminate unnecessary apostrophes even as they were required to insert others. See also Ralph K. Alger, Basic Skills in Grammar, Book 2 (New York: Cambridge Book Co., 1976), pp. 94-5.

[6]The Harbrace College Handbook, in its "Glossary of Usage," lists not only commonly confused terms but also misused terms such as "irregardless." Schor and Fishman has "Watch Out For" sections in many chapters, while other features of this text (formerly named Guide to Basic Writing) include "Fourteen Tricky Words," as well as Yes and No designations for various words and sentences. A spelling chapter on "Troublesome Combinations" lists ie/ei and cede/ceed/sede tandems. See also William E. Mahaney, Workbook of Current English (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1978), p. 205, calls the section "Confusing Terms" and carefully adds to the confusion by coupling the terms.

[7]Under this category of "Teaching Confusing Terms in Tandem," I should mention the penchant of textbook writers to offer rules and exceptions at the same time, and then offer exercises in unequal doses. That plurals are formed by the addition of s or es is a combination of two rules. That some words form the plural in still other ways, is an exception to the general rules. Harbrace Handbook (168), after offering rules and exceptions, asks for an excercise in which only 7 of 20 words form their plural with the addition of s. The others require es, ves, ses, and ies. Of the seven "normal" words, three are tricky. For example, the plural of bath, if erroneously written written as bathes, would still appear to be a "correct" word. Such "exercises" are clearly disguised tests, offering no opportunity for practice or habituation.

[8]For a detailed discussion, see my article "Teaching Error, Nurturing Confusion: Grammar Texts, Tests, and Teachers in the Developmental English Class," College English, LV, 4 (April, 1983), pp. 390-399.